

Lawmakers get rare glimpse behind walls of Anchorage Correctional Complex

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KTVA

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The lawmakers who called for a closer inspection of the Department of Corrections got a rare glimpse Tuesday behind the walls of Anchorage Correctional Complex. It's one of the most crowded in the state—with up to three inmates per cell and several more sleeping close together in what was originally meant to be a gym.

"It would be great if we could have more space to put pre-trial inmates, but that's not the case," said Bryan Brandenburg, the department's deputy director of institutions.

As many as 90 inmates can be in a module at one time—in a space designed to hold 60—with only one corrections officer to handle all of them.

"Do you feel safe in those conditions?" asked Senator Hollis French of one officer, who responded, "I do, but I can't say anything for anyone else."

The overcrowding makes conditions ripe for passing along contagious diseases—like Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA).

"How serious have you seen staph infections?" Senator French asked Dr. Henry Luban, the department's medical director.

"I don't mean to waffle, but that's a complicated question," Luban responded.

"Give me a general number," said Senator Bill Wielechowski.

"Handful," Luban responded.

French told CBS 11 News, "I thought the doctor was a bit evasive, but what we really want to see is how pervasive is it."

It may be a while, however, before the senator has any real figures, because the department began tracking MRSA only a few weeks ago.

"What we have is 14 cases we know of statewide and two staff," said Commissioner Joe Schmidt.

Three corrections officers spoke before the Senate Judiciary Committee, testifying about their own experiences with MRSA. They say, their workplaces made them sick.

Todd Godfrey, who works at the Anvil Mountain Correctional Center, was infected in December, likely by one of the inmates with whom he comes into close contact.

"I pat search them, I strip search them, I search their clothing, inventory their belongings," Godfrey said.

Dennis Hansen, a Spring Creek correctional officer, caught MRSA in July 2006.

"I'm that mythical officer suspended for talking to the press," said Hansen, who was suspended for a week without pay for speaking with CBS 11.

"What I told Ms. Jang from Channel 11 was my own personal experience with MRSA."

Godfrey said that department officials denied that he got sick at work.

"A second e-mail from the public protection group said, 'Your injury leave has been denied due to the fact there is no evidence you contracted MRSA in the institution,'" he read before the standing-room-only crowd.

The department has only recently begun tracking MRSA.

"The biggest misconception was hundreds of cases of MRSA and a dozen officers bringing it home to their families," Schmidt said. "That's a terrible thing to accuse somebody of—standing by while something like that happens. And I was very glad to hear (that) the union never really said that. That was monumental because frankly, that's an offensive thing to be accused of."

But Schmidt says, the Spring Creek Correctional Center has been tracking MRSA for the last four years and shows that about 10 percent of its inmates contracted the disease.

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